# Russia Resurgent? Untangling the Role and Meaning of Moscow's Proxies in West Africa and the Sahel

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## Abstract

Growing international concern over Russia's military and political resurgence in Africa and the possibility of creating a renewed Cold War has been rekindled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of war in Europe in February 2022. Russia's growing influence in Africa through the re-establishment of old ties and the creation of new ones has been perceived as a quest to re-establish the geopolitical gains that the Soviet Union achieved before its collapse in 1989. Increasing demand for Russian weaponry and equipment, support for unpopular, illegitimate, or unconstitutionally elected leaders, and the targeting and interest in mining concessions and natural resources are considered by the West to be a threat to democratic gains and stability in an already fragile continent. Several questions arise as a result of the deepfake propaganda around occurrences on the continent. How has Russia's resurgence or reemergence manifested on the African continent? What instruments does Russia utilise to exert its influence in Africa? What are the potential opportunities and threats of Russian presence in West Africa and the Sahel? And how will other global actors be affected?

This debate article seeks to examine a particular aspect of Russia's resurgence on the



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African continent, namely, the presence of Russian proxies in West Africa and the Sahel. It examines the multiple dynamics created by their presence, the potential threats that their proliferation and activities generate in an already fragile sub-region, and how such activities, if unconstrained, can impose other potential dangers on the continent and the globe.

**Keywords:** Russia's Proxies, West Africa, Sahel.

## 1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent outbreak of war in February 2022 has brought back old threats and is re-shaping the international order in ways unseen since the end of the Second World War. There are several fascinating facets of this war, not least are its wider geopolitical ramifications on other parts of the world. In one particular instance relating to Africa, when the existing post-1945 world order was created, all African states except Liberia and Ethiopia were colonies of European metropoles, meaning they had no say and limited agency over the decisions taken on their behalf. The Russo-Ukrainian war is beginning to tinker with the existing geopolitical setup in ways that were inconceivable just 18 months ago—notably in the way African states are acting on the world stage. This is epitomised by their voting patterns in the UN Security Council (UNSC), the General Assembly (UNGA) and its specialised agencies, especially the Human Rights Council, and it has led to a renewed global attention on two synergistic developments. The first is the demonstration of Africa's agency on the international stage in terms of its voting patterns in the UN General Assembly and other agencies, and the second relates to the role of a resurgent Russia in Africa on multiple fronts. Although Russia's political, military, and economic influence in sub-Saharan Africa is negligible compared to other global actors, it is considered one of the fastest-growing trade partners (Mureithi 2022, 1; Faleg and Secrieru 2020, 1). But herein lies what we see as a puzzle that needs untangling and explanation.

This debate article seeks to examine a particular aspect of Russia's resurgence on the African continent, namely, the presence of Russian proxies in West Africa and the Sahel. Furthermore, it examines the multiple dynamics created by their presence and the potential threats that their proliferation and activities generate in an already fragile sub-region. Finally, we analyse how such activities, if unconstrained, can impose other potential dangers on the continent and the globe.

## 2. Background

Russia has reemerged in Africa after a long absence following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. By the mid-2000s, however, Russian military, technological and economic strength were on the rise. Russia had been admitted into multiple international communities where, prior to the end of the Cold War, it did not have access to the Group of 7 (G7) states. In recognition of the

political and economic reforms it had undertaken, the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and Italy added Russia to their group in 1998, transforming the previous G7 into the G8. However, all was to change, probably as a prelude to what was to follow, when in March 2014, Russia sparked an international crisis when it conquered and occupied Crimea, previously an autonomous republic of Ukraine. In response to this flagrant breach of international law, the original G7 responded by indefinitely suspending Russia's membership in the group, effectively dissolving the larger G8. Russia's annexation of Crimea and rustication from the G8 led to a series of diplomatic missteps resulting in isolation from the US and Europe, mainly due to the Kremlin's interventions in Ukraine, Libya, and Syria.

Due to its increasing isolation among the powers of the Western world and cognisant of a loss of influence elsewhere, Russia recognised the importance of creating new allies and rekindling relationships with old ones in Africa to promote its agenda as a relevant global actor and get access to the rich natural resources in Africa. We argue that Russia's re-emergence in Africa is a natural consequence of its historical ties to a continent that it once perceived as its *chasse gardée*.

Russia leverages its humanitarian and soft-power initiatives to promote itself as a constructive player in global affairs (Ramani 2022). This was demonstrated in its endeavours to support African countries with Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccines while other developed countries were focusing on their populations. This complemented the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) system and other states that also provided free vaccines to Africans.

Although Russia's return and presence in West Africa and the Sahel is not new and represents the reopening of otherwise old and dormant ties, this has been present in almost dire apocalyptic terms. Siegle (2022) argues that:

> Russia has been aggressively pursuing its strategic objectives in Africa in recent years—securing a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, gaining naval port access in the Red Sea, expanding natural resource extraction opportunities, displacing Western influence, and promoting alternatives to democracy as a regional norm. Africa, thus, is a "theater" for Russia's geostrategic interests rather than a destination itself—a perspective reflected in the means that Russia employs. Unlike most major external partners, Russia is not investing significantly in conventional statecraft in Africa—e.g., economic investment, trade, and security assistance. Rather, Russia relies on a series of asymmetric (and often extralegal) measures for influence —

mercenaries, arms-for-resource deals, opaque contracts, election interference, and disinformation (Siegle 2022).

Though the argument above and several others paint a one-sided picture of a big bad Russian bear devouring African states through evil intentions and actions, we have argued elsewhere that the very nature of how knowledge is generated, packaged and transferred reflects global and power asymmetries (Danso and Aning 2022; Edle et al. 2022). Yet again, the presentation of African states' positioning on the Russo-Ukrainian war is not analysed on the basis of the individual states' calculus of their national interests but rather seen through the lens of external actors' assessments of how African states *ought to act* and what is good for them were they to choose particular sides. Therein lie the fallacies and weaknesses in understanding what drives these states and how best to engage them in fruitful dialogue.

How has what we term either resurgence or reemergence manifested on the continent as a whole? As mentioned by Siegle above, Russia's presence on the continent has been manifested through its bilateral agreements based on arms sales and investments in energy and mineral resources (Siegle 2022). But what has really drawn global attention to Russian activities in the sub-region relates to two mutually reinforcing dynamics. The first is Russia's grand entry into Mali and the popular protests by Malians in favour of breaking ties with its former colonial ruler and post-independence manipulator of domestic politics par excellence, France, to be replaced by Russia. The second relates to the growing international concerns about Russian proxy military presence in fragile West African and Sahel states. Such concerns are based on earlier experiences gathered from countries like the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan, where Russia's proxies have acted in violation of international norms, influenced elections, and protected unconstitutional regimes. This is, however, not to exclude other actors like the French, who have also committed such acts in Africa.

Proxy forces or actors and their role in international conflicts, although not a new phenomenon, have increased in the 21st century due to their advantages of not directly implicating the states involved and also reducing the political and financial cost of war (Aning 2021). However, for Africa, the use of proxies has blighted its post-colonial experiences resulting in its continental organisation passing multiple resolutions and a convention against their presence (Organisation of African Unity 1977), which came into force in 1985. Despite this convention, mercenaries and proxies have continued to be a consistent threat against states. Therefore, the presence of "new proxies"

on the African continent is nothing new or surprising. What is critical in the new discourse about the use of proxies by other powers must be examined in a critical and dispassionate manner. For example, a new military entrant, the Wagner Group, which is a proxy group by Russia, has been justified by authors like Stronski (2020) as a versatile, cheap and, deniably, a perfect instrument for a declining superpower eager to assert itself without taking too many risks. The critical question, of course, becomes at what cost to the states and people in which they operate.

## 3. Russia's Re-emergence in Africa: A Historical Approach

In this section, we take a historical perspective to understanding Russia's re-emergence in Africa. Russia's return to Africa's political, social and economic scene commenced through its earlier engagement in the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) multilateral engagement formed in 2001 (Tett 2010; Ayres 2017). However, it was the election of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia on 26 March 2000, and his quest to progressively broaden Moscow's cooperative engagements with Africa, further highlighted by the 2019 Russia-Africa Peace, Security and Development Summit held in Sochi with 43 African heads of state in attendance that announced Russia's intentions in a defined manner. Instructive for the arguments in this paper and the discussions being made, the 2019 Sochi programme already provides a striking indication of Russia's grand intentions for the continent. Intelligence and risk analysts did not pay attention to what happened in Sochi, and thus the vociferous opprobrium about Russia's behaviour on the continent. In the programme document, under the subtitle, 'A Safe Africa', conference organisers recognised the security challenges faced by the continent and posed several rhetorical questions. According to the organisers:

> Illegal migration, contraband, and criminal activity are … problems facing the African continent. The biggest threat of all though is terrorism. Experts agree that to ensure a country's national security, a set of measures needs to be taken, along with preventative action to combat possible threats. The biggest vulnerabilities in this regard include weak border control, unprotected industrial facilities, and large urban areas where it becomes easy to disappear into a crowd. *An effective set of measures has been developed in Russia to counter terrorism*, *curtail illegal activity, and provide dependable protection for citizens.* Russian organizations and companies are ready and able to share their experience with African partners. What can be done in the

> current climate to make Africa safe? How can state borders be made secure, and what measures should be taken to protect major sites and facilities of strategic importance? What can be done to stop illicit substances from being brought into a country and distributed? How can offenders be quickly identified, and what steps can help optimize the smooth running of urban infrastructure? What can be done to stop the illegal use of drones, which today can be bought in any store? (Russia-Africa Summit 2019)

Understanding the role of Russia and its proxies in West Africa and the Sahel requires examining the history of a resurgent Russia from the end of the Soviet Union era until its retreat from Africa after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. The justification for Russia's increasing presence in sub-Saharan Africa through its historical relationships with the continent was clearly stated in Putin's opening speech during the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit. He argued that,

> Russia and Africa are bound by traditionally friendly ties. Our country has consistently supported the national liberation movements of the peoples of Africa, we have made a significant contribution to the formation of young states and the development of their economies, as well as building up combat-ready armed forces. Our cooperation, rooted in the period of the joint fight against colonialism, is strategic and long-standing. Of course, there are significant opportunities for intensifying Russian-African cooperation in various fields (Putin 2019; Van Uden 2020).

For a short historical introspection that is often forgotten in the debates, the collapsed Soviet Union provided support to national liberation struggles in African countries, including South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, during the Cold War. However, the fall of the Soviet Union led to a remarkable reduction and eventual withdrawal of Russian activities in Africa. Domestic imperatives, driven mainly by the urgency to rebuild the new Russian Federation, led to the closure of nine Russian embassies, three consulates and multiple cultural centres in Africa (Natufe 2011).

The return of Russia is, therefore, reminiscent of the Cold War, except this time in a new, multipolar world order; this return is less about promoting ideologies and more about seeking reliable partners in resource extraction and consumer markets to sell to (Matisek 2020). As such, the re-emergence of Russia in Africa follows a time-

tested exploitative approach that manifests in a desire to keep investments low but returns high (Faleg and Secrieru 2020). Faleg and Secrieru, for example, argue that Russia's re-emergence in Africa is to undo the substantial geopolitical gains that the Soviets experienced before retreating. This is reflected in Russia's deliberate targeting and interest in mining concessions and natural resources in Africa.

## 4. Identifying Russia's Proxies in West Africa and the Sahel

In understanding Russia's new aggressive re-entry into Africa, several terminologies have been applied. An enduring one is the word "proxy". Andrew Mumford defines proxy wars as "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome" (Mumford 2013, 1). A critical question that arises relates to what instruments Russia utilises to exert its influence in Africa. From the extant literature, Russia is believed to use ostensibly private but, in fact, state-linked actors to project its influence and interests. This in itself is not a new approach in statecraft. However, the private security/military company (PS/MC) known as the Wagner Group is perceived to be the main actor through which Russia is exporting its version of military cooperation and partnership. Wagner's activities are gaining visibility in West Africa and the Sahel, although they have had more influence in countries such as the CAR and Sudan. Strategies adopted by the Russian contractors are to enable them to also serve as a source of intelligence for the Kremlin.

While there is growing international concern over the infiltration of the Wagner Group in conflict-ridden Mali, the Malian population seem to be receptive to the presence of their newly found ally. This domestic support and the apparent loss of French influence in this geopolitical game is lost on Parens, who argues that "…In 2021, Wagner Group became involved in Mali as France began withdrawing its forces from the Sahel. If Russia successfully replaces France as the principal security partner in Mali, this could be the first shift in a West African cascade toward Russia" (Parens 2022). The historical sequencing in Paren's argument is wrong. Russia's gravitation to Bamako began long before the regime verbalised its desire for France to leave its territory. Once more, there is an implicit assumption of a lack of African agency in deciding what is good for individual states and how to manage its statecraft. What is presented as a "West African *cascade* toward Russia" seeks to present West African states as devoid of the ability to choose what is perceived to be in their national interest. Such arguments are reminiscent of the positions taken by France when its Defence Minister, Florence

Parly, argued that the Mali junta was being "provocative", leading to her being schooled in 19th-century literature by French poet Alfred de Vigny's verses on the "greatness of silence." Minister Parly referred to Vigny's poem, "La Mort du Loup" (The Death of the Wolf), and the sentence: "Only silence is great; all the rest is weakness."

What seems to irk several observers about the Malian geopolitical chess game is the apparent victory of Russia in the interim in getting the military junta in Mali to expulse the French forces and replace them with the Wagner Group. The subsequent actions of the Malian junta in pushing out Danish troops, a reduction in the European Union presence, and withdrawal from the G5 Sahel initiative all point to a loss of Western influence in Mali, at least for the moment. The Wagner Group's presence in Mali has spawned a veritable industry about their motives and modus operandi. For example, General Stephen Townsend, the head of US Africa Command, confirmed that "several hundred" Russian mercenaries are in the country (Babb 2022). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also confirmed that Mali had "turned to a private military company from Russia" to help fight jihadist groups (Seldin 2021). According to a SOFREP report, Mali is hiring 1 000 Wagner Group mercenaries to help fight ISIS jihadists in the Greater Sahara, which is believed to have at least several hundred fighters in the region (Balestrieri 2021). This report also states that Wagner will fight against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Nusrat al-Islam, officially known as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wal al-Muslimin (JNIM), and Mali will pay the company $10.8 million a month (Balestrieri 2021).

The use of private military contractors (PMC) is not the only tool used by Russia for its expansion in Africa. It also uses diplomatic means as a strategic tool across Africa and the West African sub-region. The reinforcement of its diplomatic relations is aimed at exploring the growing frustration against the French and American anti-terrorism strategies in the Sahel and the West African sub-region. This diplomatic tool includes the role of Russia as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to block sanctions from being imposed on their allies (Larsen and Hansen 2022) and also enjoy support against the West from the three rotating non-permanent African seats (Olivier 2020). In January 2022, for example, Russia defended Mali and blocked the imposition of new sanctions on the military leaders who forcefully took over power from a corrupt, abusive and incompetent regime, noting that "we have always been guided by the principle of African solutions to African problems" (Larsen and Hansen 2022). *Al Jazeera* reported on 12 January 2022 (*Al Jazeera* 2022) that,

> Russia and China have blocked the United Nations Security Council from supporting a decision by the West African economic bloc ECOWAS to impose new sanctions on Mali, after its military leaders proposed staying in power for up to five years before staging elections. A French-drafted council statement endorsing the sanctions failed to be approved in closed-door consultations on Tuesday, prompting three African council members—Kenya, Ghana and Gabon—to speak to reporters to back the regional bloc's position.

Unfettered application of sanctions raises critical ethical questions about whether democratic regimes are not subject to the same rules and regulations that create the foundations for violence and unconstitutional overthrow of regimes.

The use of disinformation agents and strategies is another way Russia is gaining ground in West Africa and the Sahel. Russia adopts a communication strategy that seeks to promote its actions in Africa while discrediting other global actors. Both traditional and social media is employed to propagate the creditable influence of Russia in different African countries and expose the weaknesses of other Western countries. According to Ramani (2020), Kremlin-aligned research institutes and media outlets have consistently framed France's counterterrorism operations in Niger and Mali as a façade for the extraction of the Sahel's uranium resources and even considered the presence of the French forces as a catalyst for the jihadist violence. Russian media outlets have strengthened neocolonial discontent in Mali toward France and portrayed French counterterrorism policy as driven by resource extraction rather than security imperatives (Ramani 2020).

Russia provides military training to a number of African countries in Russia, while their proxy companies also provide scholarships and other training opportunities for the local communities where they are established. The Rusal company in Guinea-Bissau, for example, includes such a programme in their activities, which has resulted in talented youngsters being sent to Russian universities (Makarychev and Simão 2014). As a result, the Russians are not only training their potential workforce (El-Badawy 2022) but also developing a very substantial relationship with the local communities and future leaders so they can easily influence them in the future.

## 5. The Dark Sides of Russia's Activities for West Africa and the Sahel

African leaders like Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and South Africa's Jacob Zuma have all been eager to roll out the red carpet for their Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin (Hoste and Koch 2015). Partnering with Putin, they insist, diversifies their political and economic alliances and sources of foreign investment (Hoste and Koch 2015). As indicated by Joseph Siegle, Russia's recent Africa-focused initiatives are typically concentrated on propping up an embattled incumbent or close ally: Khalifa Haftar in Libya, Faustin Archange Touadéra in the CAR, and coup leaders Colonel Assimi Goïta in Mali and Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in Sudan, among others (Siegle 2022). It is also important to note that Russia leverages humanitarian and soft-power initiatives to promote itself as a constructive player in global affairs (Ramani 2022).

This relationship, however, does not come without dire consequences for vulnerable and conflict-ridden countries. The increase in demand for Russian weapons and equipment derives partly from the fact that they are relatively cheap, reliable and easy to operate (Van Uden 2020).

In 2020, Russia's state arms vendor Rosoboronexport was believed to have signed $1.5 billion in contracts with ten African countries, and the next year, it secured an additional $1.7 billion in new deals at a summit in Côte d'Ivoire. These countries include Nigeria, Tanzania, Cameroon, Angola, and the CAR, although Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Uganda are the largest regular buyers of Rosoboronexport's products (*TRT World News* 2022). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that Africa accounted for 18% of Russian arms exports between 2016 and 2020. In the early 2000s, 16 African countries were recipients of Russian arms. Between 2010 and 2019, the figure went up to 21. Selling ammunition and weapon systems to African countries props up the Russian economy and industrial base (Klomegah 2019) and potentially increases the risks of armed conflicts in an already volatile sub-region.

While deals with other global actors like the United States and the European Union (EU) come with a range of conditions based on human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law, Russia offers deals to African leaders with no such constricting conditions. Russian deals with African leaders are believed to be heavily tilted in favour of Moscow to secure control of priced energy assets or natural resources and are often

not publicised (Hoste and Koch 2015). Hoste and Koch give an example of the "pre-bid" agreement signed between South Africa and Russia on 21 September 2014 at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference in Vienna. After several denied requests to make the contract public, South Africa finally published the deal, which includes unprecedented clauses in the history of nuclear industry.

> The first states that Russia will hold a binding veto over South Africa's capacity to do business with any other nuclear vendor for up to 20 years—unprecedented in the history of the nuclear industry. The second clause stipulates that South Africa cannot export the nuclear technology it develops, like its passively safe core "pebble-bed" reactor. This condition could become a major obstacle to Pretoria's goal of developing a national globally competitive nuclear industry.

The use of Russian proxies in West Africa and the Sahel promotes the lack of accountability and denial of responsibility for the illegalities and brutalities associated with the activities of proxy actors. The Wagner Group, for example, has been accused of several human rights abuses committed in different African countries, but being a "semi-state" actor does not directly implicate the Russian state to be held accountable for such actions. Russia's denial of the Wagner Group's existence and status also increases the difficulty in determining the laws and regulations that should govern the group's actions (Larsen and Hansen 2022).

Russia's particular interest in conflict zones or fragile states will facilitate its engagement in West Africa and the Sahel. The growing threats and attacks from violent extremist groups and the apparent ineffective solutions by other global actors to eradicate the menace has left many states in the sub-region eager for alternative options. Russia offers that alternative but with consequences that will be detrimental to the quest to promote democracy, peace, and security in Africa. In the absence of evidence to link Russia to the military coups in Mali, it is interesting to note that two of the coup plotters, Malick Diaw and Sadio Camara, had returned to Mali days earlier from a training programme at the Higher Military College in Moscow. Allegations have also been raised concerning the involvement of Wagner in training a mercenary rebel group that killed the Chadian president, Idriss Deby (Munasinghe 2022). Russia's inability or unwillingness to also account for the activities of these proxies creates a greater risk for its activities in West Africa and the Sahel. Wagner is sometimes used in the same ways that other rational states use private military contractors, but the corrupt informal

networks tied to the Russian regime also use it in ways that are not typical of other strong states and that potentially undermine Russian security interests and, much more, that of the host states.

## 6. Potential Impacts of Russia's West Africa Engagements on Other Global Actors

The expansion of Russian military influence in West Africa and the Sahel will result in a setback for other global actors. The evident resentment for France in countries like Mali, Chad, and Burkina-Faso through mass protests calling for the exit of France will not only affect France's influence in these countries but the general influence of the European Union, the US, and other world powers. France, perceived as the voice of Europe in the former French colonies, will lose its power in these countries.

While US engagements have not sufficiently kept pace with the changing landscape in Africa (Zimmerman 2020), Russia's renewed interest in Africa can play an important role in its political ambition to build strategic control over energy networks and resources (Hoste and Koch 2015).

The role of Russia's proxies in West Africa and the Sahel can lead to an increase in anti-Western sentiments in the sub-region. The open and growing resentment against France in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad (Sofuoglu 2022) may be a demonstration of the influence of Russia's disinformation campaigns. In Mali, protesters in favour of the coup orchestrated by Col Assimi Goïta on 18 August 2021 led to mass protests in favour of the coups, and protesters chanted not only in support of the coup but also called for the departure of France and a new friendship with Russia, which seems to project some hope for the deteriorating security situation in Mali.

Russia's return to Africa also creates the possibility of turning Africa into an arena for great-power competition. While Russia is broadening its reach in Africa, other global actors are monitoring, and a new Cold War era could begin.

## 7. What Must Be Done? Way Forward

The growing security threats in West Africa and the Sahel, deteriorating living standards, hard-felt effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and other challenges facing the continent must not blindfold and determine decisions that can further worsen the situation in the

sub-region. The direct and indirect interventions of Russia through its proxies must be well examined to ensure the interest of African states are prioritised. Russia's deliberate target of unpopular, illegitimate, or unconstitutionally elected leaders who need external support to rule further threatens the peace and security of stagnating democratic states.

The impact of Russian activities in Africa does not only affect the continent; other global interests are also affected. Therefore, the international community needs to review the laws on the use of private military agents, the links with their states and the responsibilities and accountability of such states under international laws.

## 8. Conclusion

The call for Western countries to reconsider their engagements in Africa cannot be over-emphasised. The deteriorating relationship between France and its colonies in Africa, and the subsequent call for Russian support in what is considered as the failure of France in the fight against jihadist threats in the region, demonstrates the growing influence of Russia in Africa. While Mali is considered to be the spotlight and entry point of the Russian Wagner Group in West Africa and the Sahel, there is the need to understand the critical repercussions of this move for the other, equally vulnerable countries in the sub-region and the African continent in general. While considering the investments and positive results from the re-emergence of Russia in Africa, it is also important to examine the factors that facilitate the intervention of Russia's proxies in the sub-region.

The African Union, ECOWAS, and other regional bodies must not limit their actions to condemning undemocratic regime changes and authoritarian or repressive regimes but contribute to reinforcing democratic values to prevent the progressive dependence on Russia.

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